



Highly efficient hydrogen evolution over $\text{Co}(\text{OH})_2$ nanoparticles modified $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ co-sensitized by Eosin Y and Rose Bengal under Visible Light Irradiation

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ABSTRACT

In this work, non-noble metal cobalt hydroxide nanoparticles [$\text{Co}(\text{OH})_2$ NPs] implanted uniformly on graphitic carbon nitride ($\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$) as a co-catalyst for hydrogen evolution reaction (HER) by in-situ chemical deposition method were reported. After co-sensitized by Eosin Y (EY) and Rose Bengal (RB) dyes, this photocatalyst exhibited a comparatively low onset potential (0.26 V) for HER and high photocatalytic HER activity under visible light irradiation. The $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ not only provided a large area and nanoporous structure for the confined growth of $\text{Co}(\text{OH})_2$ NPs, but also greatly facilitated EY and RB (ER) molecules assembling on its surface, which promoted the charge transfer from dye to co-catalyst. The PL spectra and lifetime test showed the strong interaction between $\text{Co}(\text{OH})_2$ NPs and $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ could enhance the transfer rate of the photogenerated electron to reduce the carriers recombination. About 431.9 μmol of hydrogen generated over ER co-sensitized $\text{Co}(\text{OH})_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ in 3 h. The apparent quantum efficiencies (AQE) of 29.6 and 27.3% were achieved at 520 nm and 550 nm over $\text{Co}(\text{OH})_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$, respectively. In addition, this co-sensitized photocatalyst showed satisfied stability for HER, no remarkable decay of activity was observed in 900 min reaction. These results imply that $\text{Co}(\text{OH})_2$ is a stable and efficient cheaper co-catalyst for photo-HER.

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1. Introduction

Photocatalytic water splitting for hydrogen production by sunlight irradiation is one of the most promising routes for the development of clean and renewable energy sources [1–5]. In order to convert solar energy to hydrogen efficiently, a photocatalyst must absorb the most of visible sunlight illumination [6]. $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$, a novel and metal-free photocatalyst, has been widely used in water splitting study. Its suitable conduction band position can reduce the H^+ to produce hydrogen from water [6]. However, it exhibited pretty low activity under longer wavelength irradiation due to its relatively wide band gap of 2.7 eV [7]. Only shorter than 460 nm light can be absorbed by $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ itself, which leads to wasting about 48% irradiation of sunlight in visible region.

In the past decades, many efforts have been done in improving the visible light response of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$, such as metallic doping [10–13], nonmetallic doping [14–18], copolymerization [19], and

integrating $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ with other semiconductors [20,21], polymer [22], and electron acceptors (graphene and graphene oxide) [23,24] or introducing mesoporous structure [25–29], for example, $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ doped with Zn shows an enhanced optical absorption, because of the d-p repulsion of the Zn 3d and N 2p orbitals. Nevertheless, the efficiency for photo-HER was still low under 540 nm irradiation [13]. Doping the $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ with the nonmetallic could modify its electronic properties and extend its optical absorption to the visible region by creating localized/delocalized states in the band gap of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ matrix, which could efficiently enhance its photocatalytic HER activity. For instance, after partial S substitution of N in $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$, the valence bandwidth is increased, which made $\text{C}_3\text{N}_{4-x}\text{S}_x$ photocatalyst workable for photo-HER at 420 nm [14]. Copolymer ($\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$) obtained by dicyandiamide and barbituric acid could extend its optical absorption up to 750 nm, but the photo-HER activity was still low under irradiation at 460 nm.

For utilizing the full spectrum of solar light efficiently, a strategy of dye sensitization has been applied successfully in dye-sensitized solar cells (DSSCs), and a high photovoltaic conversion efficiency (>15.0%) has been achieved [6,30]. Some pioneer works of dye-sensitized semiconductor for photo-HER gave better

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light-to-hydrogen energy conversion efficiency [31], for example, co-sensitized g-C₃N₄ by indole-based Li-4 organic dye and asymmetric ZnPc derivative could absorb the broad visible/NIR light from 400 to 800 nm [6]. The highest AQY (~16.5%) was achieved at 420 nm over Pt/C₃N₄, although its absorptive capacity for visible/NIR light was still relatively weak.

It is known that Pt is an excellent co-catalyst for HER due to its low overpotential, however, high cost precludes widespread use of noble metals [32,33]. Therefore many efforts have been done to search low-cost and high efficient co-catalysts with comparative or even better catalytic activities than Pt. A large amount of studies indicated that Co-based compounds showed high activity for oxygen and hydrogen generation because of its low overpotential. For example, F-doping can enhance the activity of hydrogen generation over Co₃O₄ film by a 5-fold with respect to undoped Co₃O₄ [34]. Co₃(PO₄)₂ on the inert InO_x electrode also showed low overpotential for oxygen evolution reaction in neutral water [35]. Moreover, Co-based molecular co-catalysts and their derivatives, such as cobaloximes, cobalt porphyrin complexes, diimine-dioxime cobalt compounds and hexaaminocobalt complexes were high-active catalysts for hydrogen and oxygen evolution [36–41]. Their main advantages are as follows: the preparation condition of the hydroxide is more moderate. Hydroxide can combine carrier strongly because its hydroxyl can enhance the electron transfer [42], the charge separation [43] and increase the charge carrier lifetime [44] more efficiently. Metal hydroxide is more favorable to hydrogen production than its oxide due to its low overpotential under the same experimental conditions [45], metal hydroxide could also promote the hydrogen evolution by the pronounced synergetic effect [46]. Therefore metal hydroxide is proposed as potential co-catalyst candidates for HER.

Herein, non-noble cobalt hydroxide NPs implanted on g-C₃N₄ by in-situ chemical deposition methods for high efficient HER were reported. The RB and EY co-sensitized Co(OH)₂ NPs exhibited a low onset potential (0.26 V) for proton reduction and high HER activities. The g-C₃N₄ provides a large area and nanoporous structure for the confined growth of Co(OH)₂ NPs and facilitate ER molecules assembly on its surface, which further improves light harvesting properties. The ER co-sensitization can expand the light absorption range of Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ from 430 nm to 600 nm. About 432.0 μmol of hydrogen was generated over Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst in 3 h under visible light irradiation. The AQEs of 29.6 and 27.3% were achieved at 520 and 550 nm over Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄.

2. Experimental

2.1. Preparation of the g-C₃N₄ catalysts

Typically, 20 g of urea powder was put into a crucible with a cover and then heated to 600 °C within 30 min in a muffle furnace under the protection of nitrogen and maintained at this temperature for 3 h. The resultant powder was cooled to room temperature, washed with ultrapure water, collected by filtration and finally dried at room temperature.

2.2. Photocatalytic hydrogen evolution activity and AQE measurements

Photocatalytic experiments were performed in a sealed Pyrex flask (150 mL) with a flat window (an efficient irradiation area of 14 cm²) and a silicone rubber septum for sampling at ambient temperature. In a typical reaction system, 17 mg EY, 25 mg RB, 20 mg g-C₃N₄ and 100 μL 1 M CoCl₂ aqueous solution were added into 100 mL 10% triethanolamine (TEOA) aqueous solution. The light source was a 300-W Xe lamp and the light density was

100 mW/cm², which equipped with either a 420 nm cutoff filter or various band-pass filters. Photon flux of the incident light was determined using a Ray virtual radiation actinometer (FU 100, silicon ray detector, light spectrum, 400–700 nm; sensitivity, 10–50 μV μmol⁻¹ m⁻² s⁻¹). Prior to irradiation, the suspension of the catalysts was dispersed by ultrasonic treatment for 30 min and degassed by bubbling Ar gas for 20 min. The amount of hydrogen evolution was measured using gas chromatography (Aglient 6820, TCD, 13 × column, Ar carrier), and the AQE was calculated from the ratio of the number of reacted electrons during hydrogen evolution to the number of incident photons by the following equation:

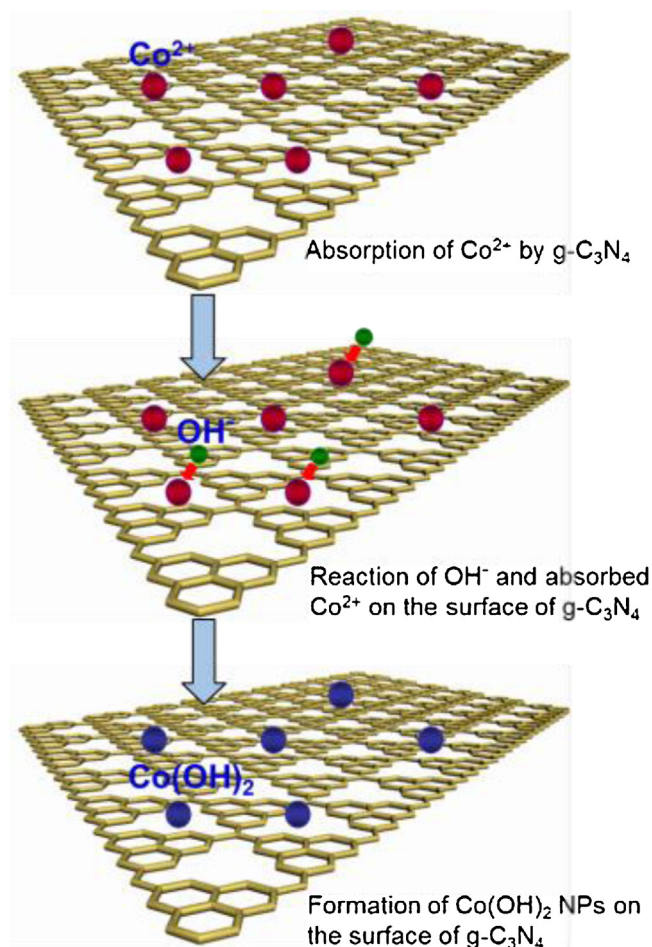
$$\text{AQE [\%]} = \frac{2 \times \text{number of evolved H}_2 \text{ molecules}}{\text{number of incident photons}} \times 100$$

2.3. Working electrode preparation and photoelectrochemical measurements

Photocurrent responses of catalyst samples were measured on an electrochemical analyzer (CHI660E) in a homemade standard three-compartment cell, consisting of an organic glass container with a quartz window and a 1.2 cm diameter opening opposite the window to the work electrode was clamped. The working electrodes were prepared by drop-coating sample suspensions directly onto the precleaned indium tin oxide glass (ITO glass) surface by microsyringe with an infrared heat lamp to speed drying. The surface of working electrode exposed to the electrolyte was a circular film with the geometrical surface areas of 1 cm². Platinum foil was used as a counter electrode and a saturated calomel electrode (SCE) was used as the reference electrode. The supporting electrolyte was 10% TEOA aqueous solution mixed with 0.1 M Na₂SO₄ aqueous solution. A 300-W Xe lamp with an optical cutoff filter (λ ≥ 420 nm) was used for excitation light source. The unbiased anodic photocurrent was investigated with an amperometric current-time technique.

2.4. Characterizations

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images were taken with a Tecnai-G2-F30 field emission transmission electron microscope operating at accelerating voltage of 300 kV. The X-ray diffraction patterns (XRD) of the samples were recorded on a Rigaku B/Max-RB X-ray diffractometer with a nickel-filtrated Cu Kα radiation. The accelerating voltage and current were 40 kV and 30 mA, respectively. XPS analysis was performed using a VG Scientific ESCALAB210-XPS photoelectron spectrometer with a Mg KRX-ray resource. FT-IR spectra were measured on a Nexus 870 FT-IR spectrometer from KBr pellets as the sample matrix. UV–vis Diffuse Reflectance Spectra were obtained with a Shimadzu UV-3600 UV–vis-near-IR spectrophotometer. BaSO₄ was used as a reflectance standard. The fluorescence decay times and photoluminescence (PL) spectra were measured using the Horiba Jobin Yvon Data Station HUB operating in time-correlated single photon counting mode (TCSPC) with the time resolution of 200 ps. Nano LED diode emitting pulse sat 460 nm with 1 MHz repetition rate was used as an excitation source. Light-scattering Ludox solution was used to obtain the instrument response function (prompt). The time ranges are 0.055 ns/channel in 4096 effective channels. Horiba Jobin Yvon DAS6 fluorescence decay analysis software was used to fit the model functions to the experimental data.



Scheme 1. Formation of $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ by the *in situ* chemical deposition method.

3. Results and discussion

The route of formation of the $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ composite is illustrated in Scheme 1. The $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ suspension was ultrasonicated in a TEOA solution to give a homogeneous $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ dispersion, and then CoCl_2 solution was added gradually to the suspension, in which Co^{2+} was first adsorbed on the surface of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ through coulomb forces because of its negative charge and then reacted with OH^- to form Co(OH)_2 NPs, resulting in the $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ composite. The XRD characterization of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ was carried out and the result was shown in Fig. 1. The strongest diffraction peak at 27.4° ($d = 0.325$) was belonged to the dense interlayer-stacking [002] peak of aromatic segment, as a graphite-like packing characteristic of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ materials [25,26]. The peak at 13.1° (0.713 nm) was attributed to [100] peak that arose from the in-plane ordering of tri-s-triazine units [8]. In addition, the smaller in-planar distance ($d = 0.677$ nm) than one tri-s-triazine unit (0.713 nm) was presumably owing to the presence of small tilt angularity in the structure. After implanting Co specie on the surface of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$, a new peak centered at 44.5° was detected, which could be assigned to [101] facet of Co(OH)_2 . This result indicates the Co specie existed in the form of Co(OH)_2 on the surface of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$. The average size of Co(OH)_2 was about 3.0 nm from the line width analysis of the [101] diffraction peak using Scherrer equation.

In order to further study the structure and performance of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ catalysts, the FT-IR spectra is carried out and the results were shown in Fig. 2. The peaks at 1200 and 1750 cm^{-1} corresponded to the characteristic stretching modes of C–N heterocycles. The peak at 809 cm^{-1} belonged to the breathing

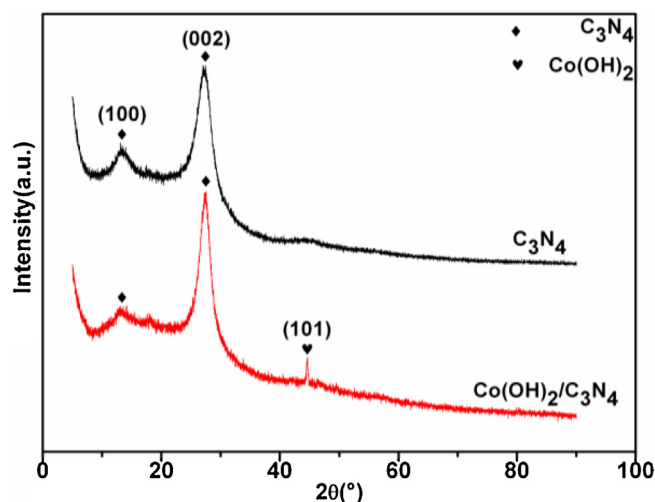


Fig. 1. Experimental XRD patterns for $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalysts.

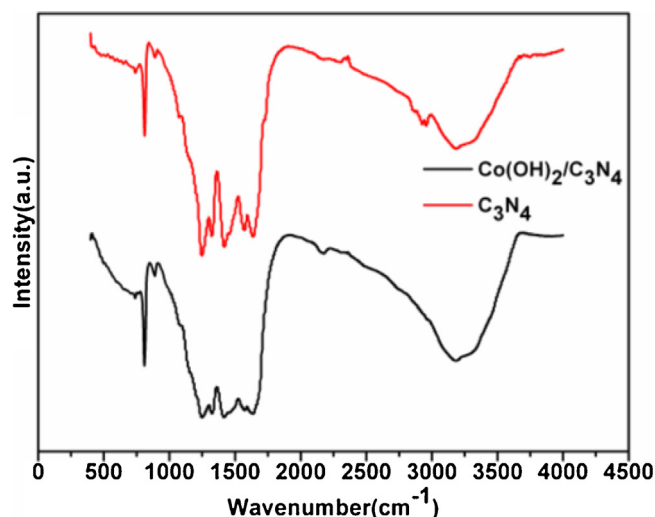


Fig. 2. The FT-IR spectra of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalysts.

mode of triazine units. The characteristic features of the condensed C–N heterocycles, i.e., the typical breathing mode was centered at 806.5 cm^{-1} . In addition, the peaks at 1315.7 and 1241.2 cm^{-1} corresponded to the stretching vibrations of the connected units of N–(C)₃ (full condensation) and C–N–C (partial condensation), respectively. While the peaks at 1645.3 , 1564.6 , and 1408.2 cm^{-1} represented the stretching vibration modes of heptazine-derived repeating units [47–50]. All these peaks represented typical characteristics of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$. After loading Co(OH)_2 nanoparticles on the surface of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$, no obvious difference was found, indicating no damage of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ structure due to formation of Co(OH)_2 nanoparticles.

The XPS spectra of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ catalysts were measured to further study the chemical state of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and Co species, and the results were shown in Fig. 3. In Fig. 3A, the peak of C 1s spectra of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ centered at 288.3 eV could be attributed to sp^2 -bonded carbon (N=C=N) species, while the weak one at 286.3 eV could be attributed to sp^3 -bonded carbon (N–C) species [51]. After loading Co(OH)_2 NPs, those binding energy peaks were slightly shifted toward more positive to 288.5 eV and 286.7 eV, respectively. These results indicated there were strong interaction between $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and Co(OH)_2 NPs, which could promote the electron transfer from $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ to Co(OH)_2 NPs. Thus interaction was also identified by N 1s spectra as shown in Fig. 3B. The peak centered at 398.8 eV cor-

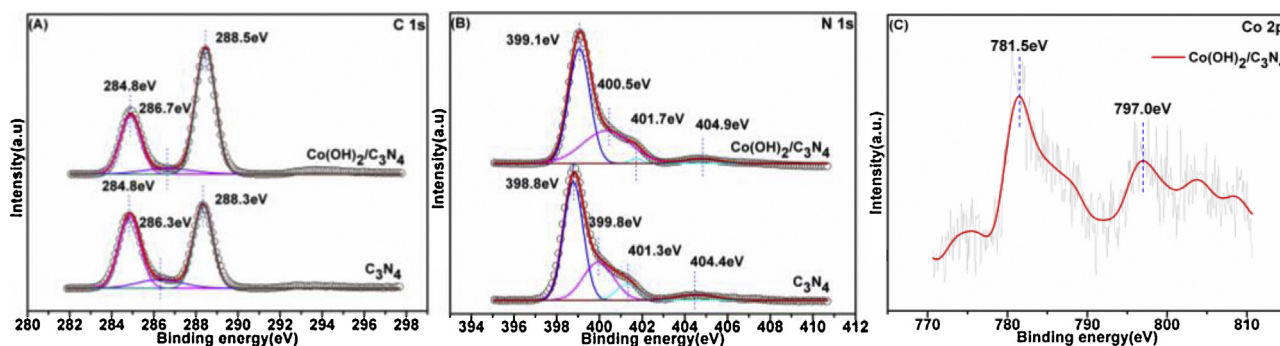


Fig. 3. The XPS spectra of g-C₃N₄ and Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ photocatalysts. (a) C1s spectra. (b) N1s spectra. (c) Co 2p spectrum.

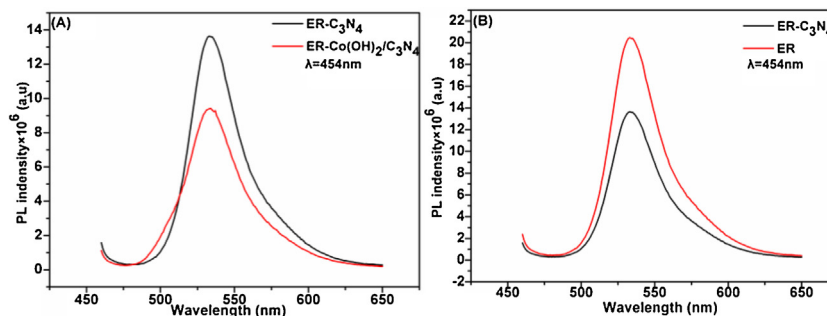


Fig. 4. PL spectra of ER and the quenching effect of addition of g-C₃N₄ and Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄.

responded to sp² hybridized aromatic N bonded to carbon atoms (C=N–C). The peak centered at 399.8 eV corresponded to the tertiary N bonded to carbon atoms in the form of N–(C)₃ or H–N–(C)₂ [52]. The weaker peak with a high binding energy at 401.3 eV corresponded to quaternary N bonded to three carbon atoms in the aromatic cycles [50,52] and the peak centered at 404.4 eV belonged to the π excitation [53,54]. After loading Co(OH)₂ NPs, the peaks also shifted slightly high binding energy to 399.1, 400.5, 401.7 and 404.9 eV, respectively. Upon this interaction, the photogenerated charges might transfer more easily from g-C₃N₄ to Co(OH)₂ and reduce the rate of the carriers recombination, as a result, the charge lifetime was prolonged and eventually led to the highly efficient hydrogen evolution activity. In Fig. 3c, the peaks centered at 781.1 and 797.0 eV were attributed to Co 2p_{3/2} and 2p_{1/2}, indicating Co existed in the form of Co(OH)₂. These results were in good agreement with the XRD.

The PL spectra further confirmed the promotion of charge separation and prolong of charge lifetime in Co(OH)₂ NPs loaded g-C₃N₄ (see results in Fig. 4). The strong PL of ER co-sensitized g-C₃N₄ indicated the fast carrier recombination, and an obvious quenching effect could be observed with the loading of Co(OH)₂ NPs, implying that the strong interaction was existed between Co(OH)₂ NPs and g-C₃N₄. The PL intensities of ER decreased significantly (see Fig. 4B). These results suggested that photogenerated electron of the excited ER could be efficiently transferred to the conduction band (CB) of g-C₃N₄ because there was no overlap between the absorption bands of ER and g-C₃N₄ [6]. The fluorescence lifetime further proved these conclusion (see Table 1). In the EY-C₃N₄, RB-C₃N₄ and ER-C₃N₄ systems, the average lifetime were 1.63, 1.46 and 1.49 ns, respectively. However, after loading Co(OH)₂ NPs on the surface of g-C₃N₄, the average lifetime were significantly increased, corresponding to 1.98, 2.21 and 1.70 ns, respectively. Co(OH)₂ NPs loading remarkably reduced the recombination of carrier and prolonged the lifetime of photogenerated charges [57,58].

To study the structure and morphology of Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst, transmission electron microscopy (TEM) was tested and the

results were shown in Fig. 5. In Fig. 5A, the catalysts showed the typical morphology and structure of g-C₃N₄ [51]. The corresponding Selective Area Electron Diffraction (SAED) pattern (insert of Fig. 5A) suggested the g-C₃N₄ was in amorphous structure. In Fig. 5B, the Co(OH)₂ nanoparticles were uniformly distributed on the surface of g-C₃N₄. The diameters of those Co(OH)₂ nanoparticles were in 2–4 nm. The high-resolution TEM (HRTEM) of Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst was shown in Fig. 5C. The lattice spacing of 0.24 nm could be assigned to the [101] facet of Co(OH)₂ and the lattice spacing of 0.27 nm could be assigned to the [100] facet of Co(OH)₂. In addition, the lattice spacing of 0.34 nm was detected, which was due to the dense interlayer-stacking [002] peak of aromatic segment. Fig. 5D clearly showed that the distribution of Co, C, N and O elements were relatively homogeneous in Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst, which also proved that the Co(OH)₂ nanoparticles were uniformly dispersed on the surface of g-C₃N₄. The energy dispersive X-ray (EDX) measurement also confirmed the co-existence of Co, C, N and O elements in Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ (Fig. 5E). In order to clarify the size distribution of Co(OH)₂ nanoparticles, a statistics about 300 nanoparticles was made and the result was shown in Fig. 5F. The results showed that the size was in the range of 1.5–4.5 nm and the maximum distribution of Co(OH)₂ nanoparticles in 3 nm was about 41.7%.

The time courses of hydrogen evolution in 10% (v/v) TEOA aqueous solution under visible light irradiation ($\lambda \geq 420$ nm) conditions were shown in Fig. 6. There was a trace amount of hydrogen evolved over Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst without ER sensitization, due to the g-C₃N₄ weak response to visible light. The rate of hydrogen evolved over Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst was effectively enhanced with the EY or RB sensitization. 259.5 and 184.2 μmol of hydrogen were evolved over Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst with the EY and RB addition in 3 h, respectively. This result confirmed that the EY and RB molecules could absorb the visible light to generate electrons and the charges further transferred to g-C₃N₄ for HER reaction. After co-sensitization with ER, the rate of hydrogen evolved over Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst was further enhanced. About 431.9 μmol of

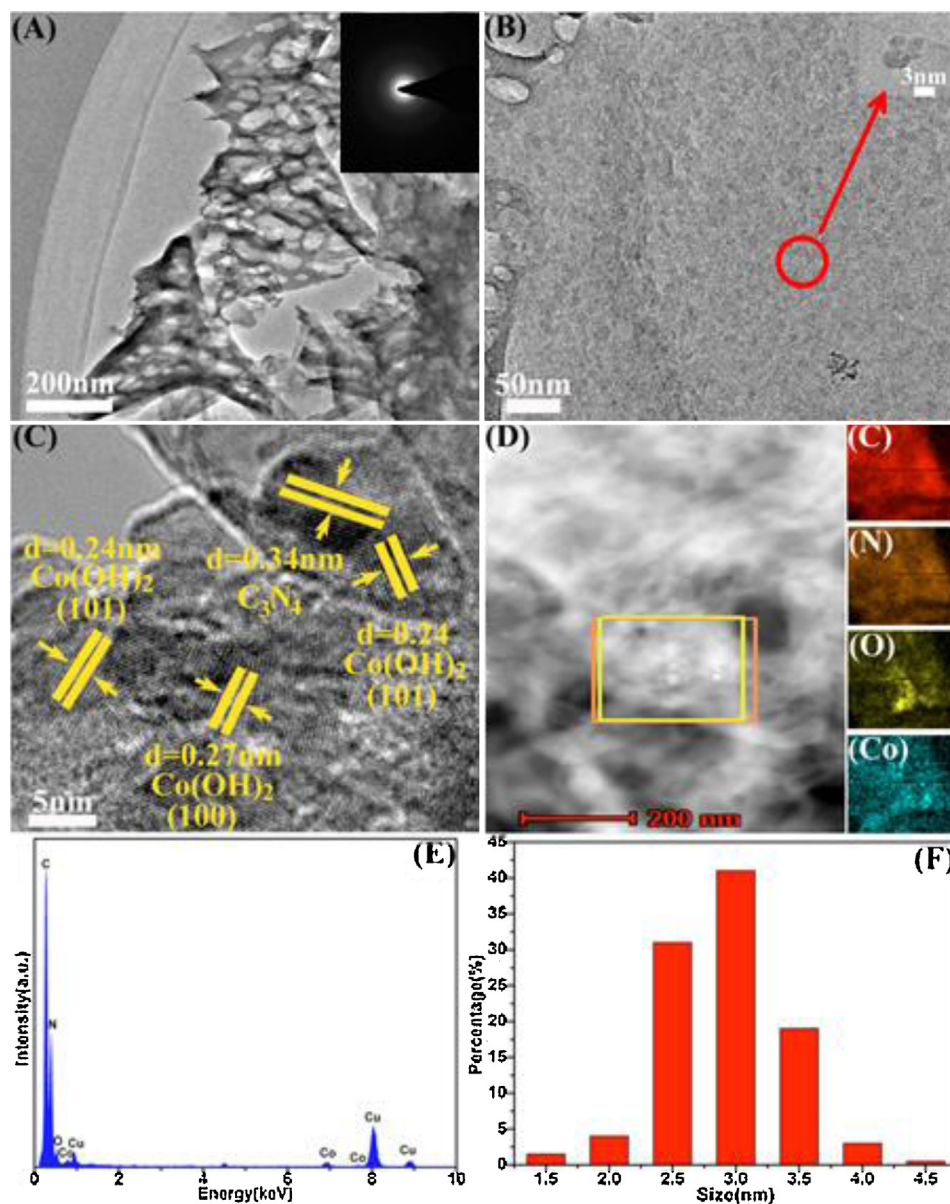


Fig. 5. Transmission electron microscopy images of $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalyst (A, B); HRTEM images of $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalyst (C); HAADF-STEM (high-angle annular dark field scanning transmission electron microscopy) image and elemental mapping images of $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalyst (D); EDX spectrum of $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalyst (E) and the distribution of particle size (F).

hydrogen evolved over $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ catalyst in 3 h. It was partially resulted from the broadened absorption range of visible light by co-sensitized dyes. Without the $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$, the suspension showed low activity for hydrogen evolution. Only 101.3 and 139.9 μmol of hydrogen were evolved with ER dyes. This result implied that the $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ not only provided a large area and nanoporous structure for the confined growth of Co(OH)_2 , but also greatly facilitated ER molecules assembly on its surface, further promoting the activity via improved light harvesting. However, no hydrogen was detected in the EY/ $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$, RB/ $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ and EY-RB/ $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ system, due to the absence of active sites for hydrogen evolution and oxygen evolution on the surface of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$. This result indicated Co(OH)_2 NPs on the surface of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ provided the active sites for HER. As a co-catalyst, the Co(OH)_2 NPs could efficiently promote surface kinetics of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$.

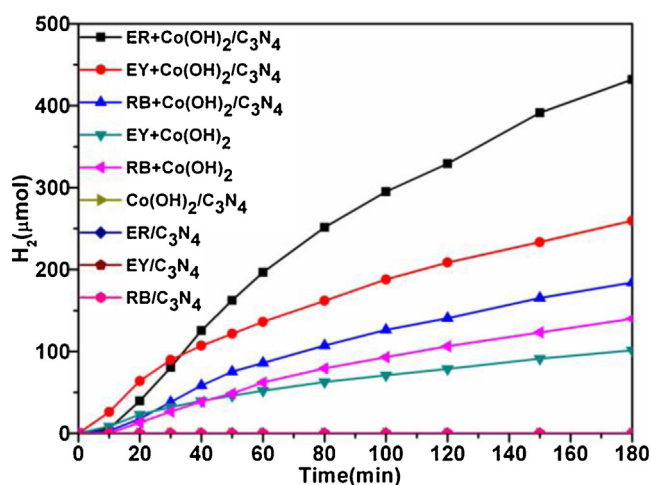
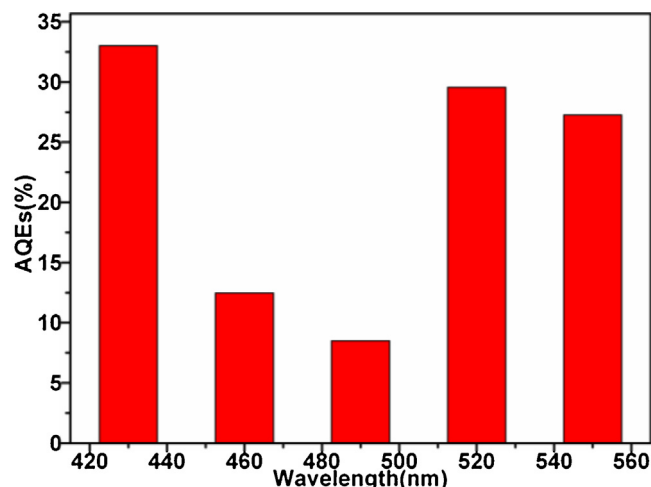
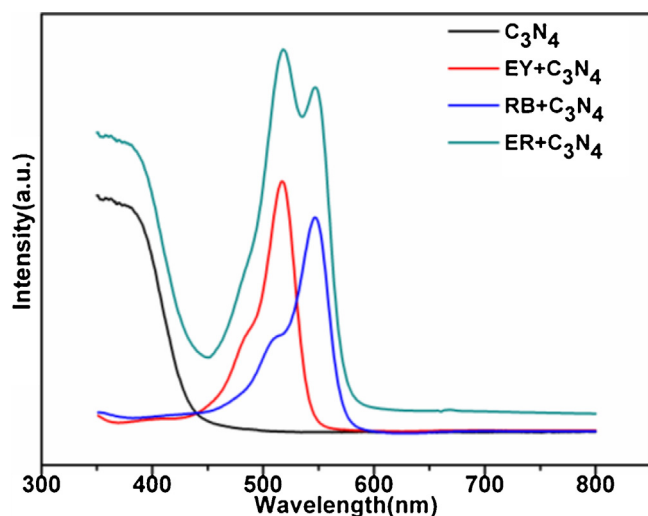
The UV–vis absorption measurement was carried out to study the response range for visible light. As shown in Fig. 7, the absorption edge of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ was at about 453 nm (2.74 eV), showing its

limited absorption edge in the visible region, which led to the low HER activity. For the EY dye, the light response range is from 440 to 550 nm and the maximum absorption wavelength is at 518 nm. However, the light response range of RB dye is from 455 to 600 nm and the maximum absorption wavelength is at 548 nm. Interestingly, after the co-sensitization by ER, the absorption range of $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ catalyst was greatly extended from 400 nm toward 600 nm, indicating that the EY sensitization was effective for extending the absorption of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ catalyst. This will greatly enhance the light harvesting capability of catalyst for visible light, especially for longer wavelengths among the solar spectrum for efficient HER reaction.

In order to clearly reveal the extended photo-response and enhanced photocatalytic HER activity of $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ catalyst in longer wavelength visible regions, the wavelength dependence of photocatalytic HER over sensitized photocatalyst was investigated in the range of 430–600 nm using various bandpass filters ($\lambda = 430, 460, 490, 520, \text{ and } 550 \text{ nm}$). Fig. 8 shows the AQEs of hydrogen evo-

Table 1Fluorescence lifetime measurements of EY and/or RB sensitized g-C₃N₄ and Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalysts.

C ₃ N ₄ systems	Lifetime, <τ> (ns)	Pre-exponential factors B	Average lifetime, <τ> (ns)	χ ²
EY	τ ₁ = 1.21	B ₁ = 1	1.21	0.9999
RB	τ ₁ = 0.43	B ₁ = 1	0.43	1.0037
ER	τ ₁ = 1.02	B ₁ = 0.7356	1.19	1.0048
	τ ₂ = 1.67	B ₂ = 0.2644		
EY-Co(OH) ₂ /C ₃ N ₄	τ ₁ = 1.65	B ₁ = 0.8105	1.98	0.9992
	τ ₂ = 3.41	B ₂ = 0.1895		
EY-C ₃ N ₄	τ ₁ = 1.37	B ₁ = 0.8527	1.63	1.0060
	τ ₂ = 3.14	B ₂ = 0.1473		
RB-Co(OH) ₂ /C ₃ N ₄	τ ₁ = 0.92	B ₁ = 0.5041	2.21	1.0140
	τ ₂ = 3.53	B ₂ = 0.4959		
RB-C ₃ N ₄	τ ₁ = 0.76	B ₁ = 0.7173	1.46	1.0450
	τ ₂ = 3.23	B ₂ = 0.2827		
ER-Co(OH) ₂ /C ₃ N ₄	τ ₁ = 0.92	B ₁ = 0.0635	1.70	1.0204
	τ ₂ = 1.48	B ₂ = 0.8191		
	τ ₃ = 3.66	B ₃ = 0.1173		
ER-C ₃ N ₄	τ ₁ = 0.78	B ₁ = 0.0782	1.49	1.0462
	τ ₂ = 1.31	B ₂ = 0.8007		
	τ ₃ = 3.11	B ₃ = 0.1211		
Co(OH) ₂ /C ₃ N ₄	τ ₁ = 2.98	B ₁ = 1	2.98	1.0864
C ₃ N ₄	τ ₁ = 2.31	B ₁ = 1	2.31	1.0835

**Fig. 6.** The time courses of hydrogen evolution catalyzed by Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ with EY and/or RB sensitization in 10% TEOA aqueous solution at pH 9 under visible light irradiation (λ ≥ 420 nm) conditions (100 mW/cm²).**Fig. 8.** The AQEs of Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ photocatalyst with ER co-sensitization under a wide range of visible light irradiation (100 mW/cm²) at pH 9 from 400 to 600 nm.**Fig. 7.** The UV-vis absorption spectra of Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ photocatalyst with EY and/or RB sensitization.

lution as a function of the incident light wavelength. The highest AQE reached 33.0% at 430 nm, which was shorter than the wavelength of the highest absorption of EY (518 nm) and RB (548 nm) in the visible light range, due to the higher energy of photons [33]. Subsequently, the AQE decreased with increasing wavelengths. The absorption of g-C₃N₄ decrease significantly from 420 to 500 nm. Therefore, the hydrogen production decreased with wavelength increase from 420 to 490 nm, which corresponds to the UV-vis absorption. However, the AQE increased at 520 nm and 550 nm due to the strong absorption wavelength of the EY (518 nm) and RB (548 nm) dye, corresponding to AQEs of 29.6 and 27.3%, respectively. These results indicated that the HER activities correspond basically with the major absorption wavelength of the ER, which revealed that the light absorption property of the photosensitizer governed the HER rate.

The activities of hydrogen evolution at different pHs (5, 7, 9, 11 and 13) were investigated to optimize the reaction condition and the results were shown in Fig. 9. The highest activity of hydrogen evolution was achieved at pH 9. About 431.9 μmol of hydrogen was evolved over Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst in ER co-sensitized suspension dispersion. With the increase of acidity, the decrease of hydrogen evolution activity might be due to the instability of Co(OH)₂ and the protonation of TEOA in acidic solution [55]. That protonation

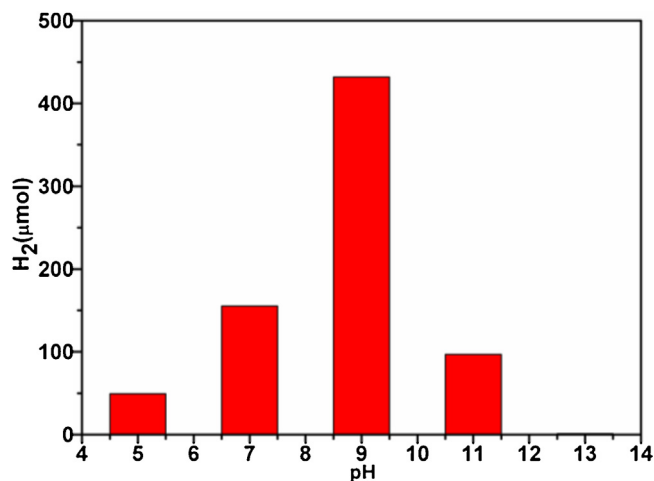


Fig. 9. The effect of pH on photocatalytic activity of $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalyst with ER co-sensitization for hydrogen evolution under visible light irradiation ($\lambda \geq 420$ nm, 100 mW/cm^2) in 10% TEOA aqueous solution at pH 9. (The reaction time was 3 h and light intensity was 100 mW/cm^2).

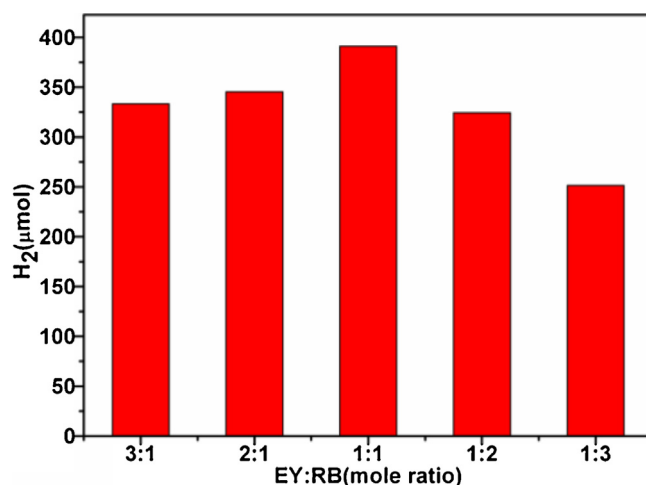


Fig. 11. The effect of the molar ratios of ER dyes on the activity of hydrogen evolution over $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalyst under visible light irradiation ($\lambda \geq 420$ nm) in 10% TEOA aqueous solution at pH 9. (The reaction time was 3 h and light intensity was 100 mW/cm^2).

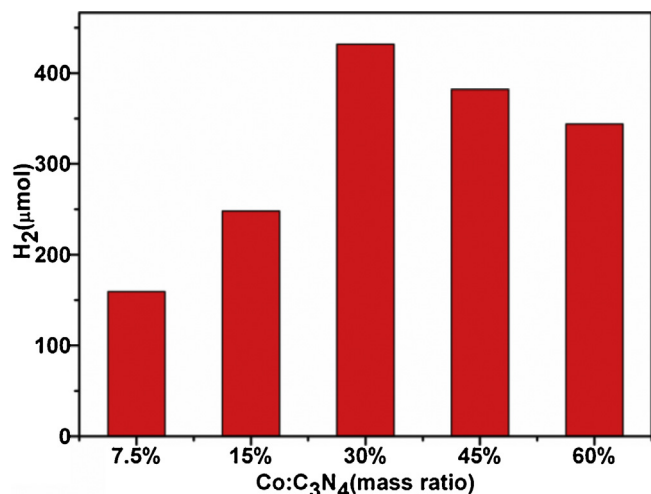


Fig. 10. The effect of the amount of Co on the activity of hydrogen evolution over $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalyst under visible light irradiation ($\lambda \geq 420$ nm) in 10% TEOA aqueous solution at pH 9. (The reaction time was 3 h and light intensity was 100 mW/cm^2).

process would impact the electron-donating properties of TEOA and the absorption performance of ER in the visible light region. However, with the increase of alkaline, the activity of hydrogen evolution also decreased. No hydrogen was detected at pH 13. It resulted from the decrease of proton concentration and the fact that hydrogen evolution became more thermodynamically unfavorable with increasing pH values [56–58]. The effect of Co loading on the surface of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ catalyst was also carried out to optimize the reaction condition and the results were shown in Fig. 10. The activity of hydrogen evolution increased with the Co loading increase. When the Co loading was 30%, the highest activity of hydrogen evolution was achieved, corresponding to $432.0 \mu\text{mol}$ in 3 h. Further increase of the Co loading, the activity of hydrogen evolution gradually decreased. The excess Co species might result in the agglomeration of Co(OH)_2 NPs, which affected its dispersion on the surface of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$. The formed large size Co(OH)_2 might also expose less active site for HER. In addition, the excess Co(OH)_2 NPs might provide more sites for the charge carrier recombination and reverse reaction. The excess Co(OH)_2 NPs loading on the surface of $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ might affect its light absorption performance by scattering and reflection. In addition, the ratio effect of EY to RB on

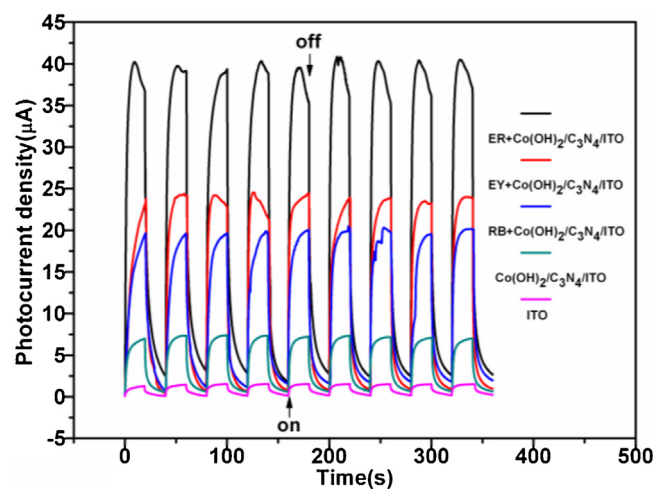


Fig. 12. Transient photocurrent time profiles of $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ photocatalyst with EY and/or RB sensitization on ITO glass in mixed solution of 10% (v/v) TEOA and 0.1 M Na_2SO_4 at pH 9 under visible light irradiation ($\lambda \geq 420$ nm, 100 mW/cm^2).

hydrogen evolution was also carried out to optimize the reaction condition and the results were shown in Fig. 11. The highest activity of hydrogen evolution was achieved when the ratio of ER was 1:1, corresponding to $432.0 \mu\text{mol}$ in 3 h. When the ratios of ER were 3:1, 2:1, 1:2 and 1:3, only 333.3 , 345.4 , 324.4 and $251.5 \mu\text{mol}$ of hydrogen evolved over $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4$ catalyst in 3 h, respectively.

Photoelectrochemical experiments were performed to study the photoinduced electron transfer processes. As shown in Fig. 12, the response to visible light could be seen during on-off cycles of visible light irradiation, while the $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{ITO}$ electrode produced a low photocurrent. The observed unbiased transient photocurrent with the dye sensitized $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{ITO}$ electrode was promoted under similar experimental conditions. The maximum photocurrents were 24.3 and $18.9 \mu\text{A/cm}^2$ after sensitized by EY and RB, respectively. Co-sensitized $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{ITO}$ electrode by ER showed more positive photocurrent, corresponding to $41.3 \mu\text{A/cm}^2$, suggesting electron injection from the photoexcited EY to the $\text{g-C}_3\text{N}_4$ [59]. This result further highlights the importance of the co-sensitization effect of ER and excited state electron transfer in generating a photoelectrochemical effect. However, the observed photocurrent densities of sensitized $\text{Co(OH)}_2/\text{C}_3\text{N}_4/\text{ITO}$

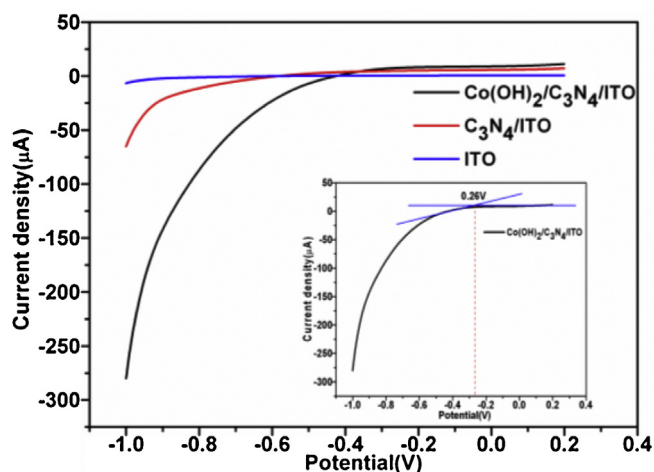


Fig. 13. LSV curves of g-C₃N₄ and Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ photocatalysts coated on ITO glass in mixed solution of 10% (v/v) TEOA and 0.1 M Na₂SO₄ aqueous solution at pH 9.

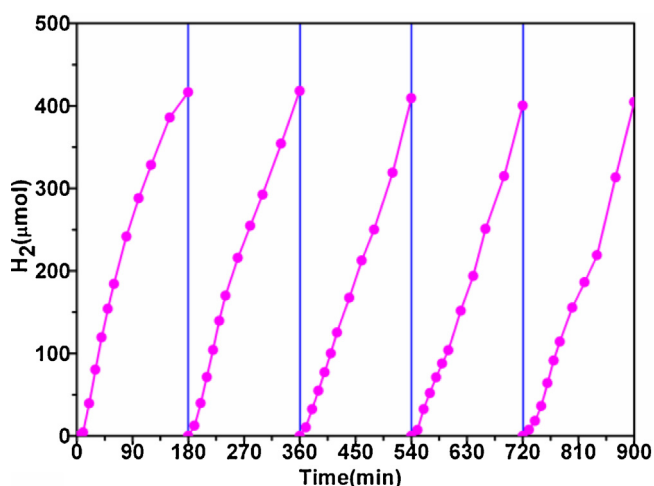
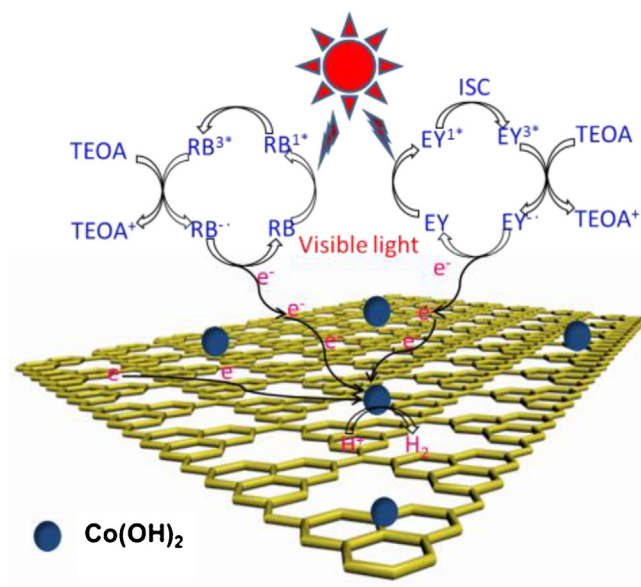


Fig. 14. The stabilities of hydrogen evolution over Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ photocatalysts under visible light irradiation ($\lambda \geq 420$ nm, 100 mW/cm²) at pH 9. The reaction was continued for 900 min. After every run, the catalysts were collected by centrifuging from the reaction mixture and redistributed in the fresh 10% TEOA aqueous solution with 17 mg EY and 25 mg RB dyes and then evacuated.

electrodes were still low in the present experiments. Although the excited state of ER can be quenched by g-C₃N₄ through electron transfer, a fast recombination of charge carriers will probably result in a very low net generation of photocurrent. In addition, the electrochemical hydrogen evolution activities of g-C₃N₄ and Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ deposited on ITO glass were also investigated using the linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) technique. As shown in Fig. 13, the cathodic current of bare ITO electrode belonged to the reduction of water to hydrogen was low with the increase of the applied potential [60]. The cathodic currents of g-C₃N₄/ITO electrode only had a relative enhancement. However, the Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄/ITO electrode exhibited a significant improvement beyond -0.4 V, which proved that Co(OH)₂ NPs were remarkable active sites which could efficiently catalyze the reduction of water to hydrogen. Moreover, the Co(OH)₂ NPs modified the g-C₃N₄ showed a low onset potential (0.26 V) as shown in the insert of Fig. 13.

The stabilities of hydrogen evolution over Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst co-sensitized by ER were tested under visible light irradiation ($\lambda \geq 420$ nm). As shown in Fig. 14, the catalysts were stable during 900 min reaction. After each run, the catalysts were collected by centrifuging from the reaction mixture and redispersed in the fresh TEOA aqueous solution. The rates of hydrogen evolution remained



Scheme 2. The proposed reaction mechanism for visible-light-driven water splitting by Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ photocatalyst with ER co-sensitization.

almost no change in every run. These results indicate that the Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst is significantly stable during the photocatalytic HER processes.

The reaction process of photocatalysis hydrogen evolution in the co-sensitized Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ catalyst system can be explained in terms of Scheme 2. The ER dye molecules absorb visible light photon to form singlet excited state EY^{1*} and RB^{1*} under visible light irradiation, and then produces the lowest-lying triplet excited state EY^{3*} and RB^{3*} via an efficient intersystem crossing. EY^{3*} and RB^{3*} can be reductively quenched by TEOA and produce EY^{•-}, RB^{•-} and oxidative donor (TEOA^{•+}) [9,61]. The e⁻ of EY^{•-} and RB^{•-} species is transferred to g-C₃N₄ by the noncovalent π - π stacking interaction due to its electron transport characteristics, which leads to spatial separation of photogenerated charges [62]. The accumulated electrons on the g-C₃N₄ will transfer to Co(OH)₂ nanoparticles. Subsequently, those electrons improve the reduction of H⁺ to form hydrogen. In addition, the semiconductor g-C₃N₄ can also absorb part of visible light to generate carrier pair. Those electrons are used to reduce the H⁺.

4. Conclusion

Non-noble metal cobalt hydroxide NPs modified the g-C₃N₄ by in-situ chemical deposition methods exhibited a low onset potential (0.26 V) and high photocatalytic activity for HER after co-sensitized by ER dyes. The g-C₃N₄ not only provided a large area and nanoporous structure for the confined growth of Co(OH)₂, but also greatly facilitated ER molecules assembly on its surface, which could further promote the HER activity by improving light harvesting. In this process, the ER, owning strong absorption ability for visible light, as co-sensitizer could expand the light absorption rang of Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ from UV light to 600 nm. The amount of hydrogen evolution over Co(OH)₂/C₃N₄ co-sensitized by ER dyes was about 431.9 μ mol in 3 h under visible light irradiation. In addition, this sensitization photocatalyst also showed rather stable photocatalytic activity for HER under visible light irradiation. The apparent quantum efficiency (AQE) of 29.6 and 27.3% were achieved at 520 nm and 550 nm, respectively, due to the strong absorption wavelength of the EY (518 nm) and RB (548 nm) dye. These results indicate that the Co(OH)₂ NPs modified g-C₃N₄ ren-

ders a stable and high efficient activity for hydrogen evolution after co-sensitizing by ER.

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